

Daughters of the Digital Empire

Book One of
Moonlight Hearts

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And Margaret Lovelace

Chapter 2: Waking Up

I woke up lost in an enormous and luxurious four poster bed. I stretched, enjoying the feel of silk sheets against my skin. I lay, basking in the indulgence of my morning, until the reality of my situation landed on me like an avalanche.

I bolted up to a sitting position. Whose bed was this? This couldn't be my bed. My bed was a dormitory special. It was a single sized bed with a mattress that might as well be cardboard. I looked around. I did not see my dorm room. I did not see the dorm common room where I last remembered sitting next to Lynn.

Instead, I saw an opulent room decorated in a mix of regency and medieval styles. The styles clashed in strange ways. The walls were medieval brickwork overlaid with tapestries. The tops and bottoms of the brickwork were overlaid with crown molding. And the furniture was a mix of Victorian romance and crusader castle. The room looked gorgeous, but it made no sense.

And then I noticed the next thing. I didn't have a hangover. I wasn't going to complain about that, but I had expected to wake up with jackhammers in my skull. Instead, I felt fine, rested even. I looked at my hands. I had polish on my nails. I wore nail polish. But last night I had been wearing linear holographic black polish. This morning, I wore bubblegum pink cream polish. I ran my hands through my hair, and then I froze. I kept my hair cut short in a pixie cut. The hair I had run my fingers through was long. It hung past my shoulders, with indulgent curls cascading down my head. This wasn't me. I suppressed a scream.

"This is fine Ren. This is fine. You're fine." I muttered to myself.

I crawled to the edge of the bed and climbed off, touching my feet on the thick carpet. It felt soft and warm between my toes as I stood up. I smoothed out the shear cream nightgown that had bunched up at my waist. I hadn't been wearing a nightgown last night. I couldn't remember ever wearing a nightgown. The gown hung off my left shoulder, like I'd stepped off the cover of a Harlequin romance novel. I could see my body through the fabric of the nightgown. The nightgown was so sheer it felt more revealing than standing naked. The boatneck collar was so wide every movement threatened to dislodge the nightgown.

"Who makes collars this wide?" I asked the empty room.

I shook my head as I spoke to myself. I didn't even sound like myself. Then, still looking down at the collar, I noticed my bust. All my life I'd hated my A-cups. My lack of any bust meant that I endured less harassment than Lynn and my other friends. But despite that, I resented looking more like a twelve-year-old than a twenty-one year old. Well, I didn't have the chest of a twelve-year-old now. I looked like Barbie decided to pose for Playboy. Looking down at my now bountiful cleavage, I guessed that I was at least a D-cup now.

"Those are going to hurt when I run," I sighed.

I scanned the room. And then finding what I wanted, I walked to the full-length mirror by the oak vanity. Again I managed not to scream when I looked in the mirror. I was not looking at my own reflection.

Last night, I had stood five feet and three inches, and weighed a hair over one hundred pounds. Last night I'd had my hair cut short in a pixie cut, dyed pink and black. Last night I'd been wearing a t-shirt with cut off sleeves and the logo of the band: Warbride. Last night I'd been wearing a pink mini skirt.

This morning, I stood a full six feet tall. I couldn't tell my weight from the view in the mirror. But I had gone from the figure of a twelve-year-old boy to the hips of a playboy model. This morning my hair was strawberry blonde. And somebody had styled it into ringlets. This morning I was wearing a cream semi-sheer nightgown. The gown hung off my shoulders and threatened to drop to the floor around me.

I stared at the reflection in the mirror. I recognized the stranger before me. This was the rival. This was the girl the player had to beat in Lynn's video game: Moonlight Hearts.

"Well fuck me like a drunken prom queen." I said to the reflection.

Still staring at myself in the mirror, I heard the door behind me open. I spun around. Behind me, a pale woman in a classic maid outfit had entered the room. She wore no jewelry that I could see. Her shoes looked like Cromwell shoes with a one-inch heel. She was gorgeous. Her rich cinnamon hair sat in a delightful bob haircut. Her face was delicate with a mouth like a bow and crimson lipstick. More anachronisms. But now that I knew that this was a video game, those inconsistencies made sense. Male programmers didn't look things up like what women wore for make-up in the Victorian era. She had an hourglass figure and I guessed that she stood about five foot five. She had ice blue eyes. I could get lost in those eyes. And given how short the skirt

was, I was also in danger of getting lost in her thighs. Only the crinoline under the skirt protected her modesty. I shook my head at the design choice. Video games.

She curtsied to me. “Lady Karen. You’re already up.”

I blanched, “I hate the name Karen.”

The maid raised both eyebrows and paused. I realized that I had confused her. Then she corrected her expression, shifting back to a customer service smile. She nodded.

“What would you prefer, my lady?”

“Ren,” I answered.

The maid nodded, “Wonderful. Lady Ren, you are to meet your cousin's suitors today. We should prepare you for such company.”

I resisted the urge to tell the maid not to call me: lady. I suspected that would not go over well. Instead, I asked, “What should I call you?”

“Lady Ren, you know my name.”

Crap. I thought about what to say, and then nodded.

“I didn’t ask what your name was. I would like to know what you want me to call you.”

The maid looked at me, meeting and holding my gaze. I had confused her again. Expressions flickered across her face. They held for moments before the customer service smile regained control. I waited while she wrestled with her emotions.

“Amy. Lady Ren, you may call me Amy.”

I smiled, “Thank you Amy. I appreciate the trust.”

Amy raised her eyebrows again, then she shook her head. “We need to get you ready. Your father will not tolerate our keeping them waiting. Please sit at the vanity.”

“Why is this whole affair starting before lunch?” I said, more to myself than Amy.

“The prince’s time is precious. He arrived late last night. I’m told he hasn’t even slept yet.”

I snorted, “We all dance like puppets for the ones above us.”

Amy said nothing in response. But I noticed that she paused for a moment as I said it.

I walked over to the three-piece vanity and sat on the padded stool there. Amy picked up a hairbrush from the vanity and began brushing out the tangles in my hair. I was about to tell her that doing so was unnecessary, when the hairbrush caught a knot and pulled. Amy froze.

“I’m so sorry Lady Ren!” She gasped.

I smiled and said, “That’s fine. It comes with the territory. Hair like this gets tangled.”

Amy didn’t move. She stared at me in the vanity mirror. I tried to read her expression, and concluded she was staring in disbelief.

I tried to understand what had happened. And then I did understand. Lynn loved this video game. She’d played it through dozens of times. She’d completed every possible route through the game. She’d earned every ending. I hadn’t, but I’d watched her play enough times. And I knew what I’d done. I was the rival. The rival didn’t have a real name, the player picked it. The rival was the player’s main antagonist throughout the game. She was the player’s cousin and a spoiled brat who expected the world to bow to her and bend to her whims. She never treated anyone with respect or decency.

And I apologized using her voice.

I didn’t know if this was the game, or a hallucination based on the game, or something else. But either way, it didn’t matter. The rival’s personal maid would understand that my behavior was odd. But the typical treatment that the rival inflicted on everyone wouldn’t surprise her. And I wondered, what should I do? Should I play the rival as written? I knew the game well enough that I could do that. I would hate it though. The rival was a terrible person. And then another thing hit me. In most of the

endings, the rival ends up disinherited and either exiled or imprisoned. If I played things like the script said, I would be marching to my doom.

But what was I playing? Was I passed out on the couch in the common room at my dormitory? Was I hallucinating? Was I having a near death experience? I didn't think I'd drank enough for those options. Then I remembered. The lightning. Had the lightning hit the dormitory? I'd been touching the computer when it happened.

Was I dead?

I put my left hand to my heart. I could feel my heartbeat. But that told me nothing. This felt real. I pinched my left forearm hard enough to draw a little blood.

"Lady Ren, please don't do that!" Amy said, batting my hand away. "We'll have to hide that." She dabbed a cloth against my arm to sop up the drop of blood.

"I'm sorry." I said, "I'm making your job more difficult. But something about this felt so unreal that I had to check."

"I know the feeling," Amy said, setting aside the cloth and returning to my hair. "This morning has been surreal."

"That's my fault, isn't it?" I asked.

Her face went red as I watched in the mirror. "No, of course not."

"You don't have to say it," I said. "I know what I'm like."

Amy continued brushing and didn't answer. She was afraid of me. She was trying not to say the wrong thing. I wasn't only her mistress. I was a threat. I was dangerous. I didn't like that. Well, dream or not, dead or not, I came to a decision. I wasn't going to play the role of the rival. I was going to play the role of the best friend. The heroine could have the boys, I wasn't interested in boys anyway. So, there was no point in fighting her for them. I would help her win whichever suitor she wanted. I would wake up or I wouldn't. But either way, I would be able to live with myself.

"Lady Ren? Are you alright?" Amy asked, "You've gone quiet."

I considered what to say.

"This morning has been like waking up from a bad dream," I said. "I look back at myself and I don't like who I've been. And I don't know why I was like that. But I'm going to fix it as best I can. I will make it up to people. I will make it up to you."

"That isn't necessary, Lady Ren."

I raised my voice, "I'll decide what's necessary."

Amy flinched back from me, her eyes wide.

"There," I said, "You're afraid of me. You're used to my temper. You expect me to hurt you. That is awful. I'm awful. I assume the other servants are afraid of me as well?"

Amy hesitated and then nodded, "They call you the She-Wolf of Ys."

"I'm sure they call me worse. And I'm sure I deserve it."

"No, Lady Ren. You're fine. It's fine."

I shook my head, and then looked at the carpet.

"No. But it will be. I will be. I know what I've been up till now. And I'm only sorry it took me this long to see it myself."

I met Amy's eyes in the mirror and held her gaze again. We stared until I began to blush. And then I noticed a tear running down Amy's face.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Lady Ren." Amy said, and then choked up as she tried to speak further.

"You don't have to say anything. I've been terrible. Trying to be better doesn't make that okay. But I hope that it will make things more tolerable for you."

Amy wiped the tear away, "We should hurry then Lady Ren. They won't wait for us."

I nodded, and then added, "One more thing. When we are alone you can call me Ren. I know you'd get reprimanded if you did it in front of anyone else. But you don't have to bother when we're alone."

Amy continued brushing, "Oh, I couldn't do that."

I sighed. "Well, that's something to look forward to then."

"Yes Lady Ren." Amy said, and she continued brushing. But as she did, I thought that I saw her cheeks redden.

